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ABSTRACT

The idea of general education has ebbed and flowed for generations. Recent calls for general education, appearing both in the professional and popular literature, demand an integrative curriculum that brings people toward common understandings. The content of what is taught matters less than that a continual effort be made to enhance social cohesion and move students toward a realization that participation in the polity is important. In Japan, school environments direct students toward such a sense of social responsibility; in the United States, and especially in community colleges, the curriculum must carry the general education message. Since the community college curriculum centers on the liberal arts and occupational studies, general education must be diffused throughout these areas. The colleges have effectually reconceptualized the liberal arts in the direction of general education, and have had some success in suffusing general education concepts into occupational studies. However, constant attention must be paid to general education because the courses keep drifting away from the disciplines from which they arose. General education is difficult to teach because, by definition, it is broad and integrative; and it is futile to insist on it as a graduation requirement because so few students graduate. Overcoming these dilemmas, answering the question of what knowledge everyone should possess, and assessing the outcomes of general education demands leadership from within the institution rather than directives from the state level. Integrated, self-contained, interdisciplinary general education courses should be required for everyone coming to the institution, and their outcomes assessed globally, in order to bring a greater understanding of the broader society and of the student's place within it. (JMC)

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Arthur M. Cohen

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What Can Be Done About General Education?

Arthur M. Cohen

Ideas in education have a long sweep. Like waves generated from afar they roll continuously, breaking on the shore, then rolling back to merge with other waves until they reappear elsewhere. Institutional assessment, for example, is a perennial wave. Periodically, questions of institutional value are raised. They roll for awhile, generating concern about what might happen when curriculum requirements are mandated or student testing is imposed. Then, after the educators on the shore have rushed around decrying the idea, the wave breaks and dissipates.

General education has ebbed and flowed for generations. It began early in this century with the belief that we had to re-establish a curriculum that had been broken apart by allowing free election in undergraduate education and introducing professional schools into the universities. It was prominent in the 1930s, in a trough in the 1960s, and it swelled again in the 1980s. The most recent calls for general education have appeared in several notable books: Boyer's, College: The Undergraduate Experience in America (1987); Integrity in the College Curriculum, published by the Association of American Colleges, and To Reclaim a Legacy, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, both in 1985; the National Institute of Education's Involvement in Learning, which appeared in 1984; and the Carnegie Foundation's book, Missions of the

College Curriculum, which initiated the current set in 1977.

All those works called for an integrative, centripetal curriculum that would bring people toward common understandings. The arguments centered on the need to encourage participation in the polity, to bring young people to an understanding of what the world is and how it works, of how to manage their environment. Notice that all these justifications have to do with benefit for the society more than for the self, an important distinction. The Greek word "idios" refers to one's own, private, personal self. It is the root of our word, idiosyncratic, and also of the word idiocy. To the Greeks, idiocy referred to a person concerned only with self. People who are so self-centered that they have no interest in what is going on around them are idiots. General education, then, is to entice the person away from idiocy. It is that which connects the self with what is around it.

Arguments in favor of general education have appeared in the popular press as well as in the professional literature. The Atlantic magazine for November, 1988, included a review of history texts used in the public schools with the author (Paul Gagnon) arguing that we study history "to grasp the complexity of historical cause; ...to realize that not all problems have solutions; to be prepared for the irrational, the accidental in human affairs..."(p 44). Other authors have contended that education must bring young people to understand the significant effect of slow change, referring to changing characteristics of society and of the environment that have long term effects: the

depletion of the rainforest or the ozone layer.

One slow-moving change is social justice. Students periodically become incensed that one or another group is not sharing equally in all that society has to offer and conclude that the United States is not a just society. But without a sense of history they have no basis of judgment. What was social justice for that group 50 or 100 years ago? Perhaps, by comparison, society now is quite just. Maybe it could be better but then everything could be better. A sense of history is necessary to understand relative positioning.

Curriculum must be justified as being useful for something. Occupational education gained a strong position in higher education because of its putative value in assisting people in making a living. But it is not the sole purpose of higher education. If it were, the colleges would be abandoning the very society that supports them. The individual needs to gain the realization that participation in the polity is essential. Whether we teach Western history or the history of special groups or Western philosophy or Eastern religion is less important than our continual effort to move our students away from idiocy.

General Education in Community Colleges

I spent some time in Japan in October and visited a junior high school there. When you go into a school in Japan you take off your shoes and put on a pair of slippers. Students, staff, and visitors all wear slippers. And, as the expression goes, the floors are so clean you could eat off them. There were no graffiti either. I asked, "Why does this school look so clean?"

And the response was, "The students take care of it." I was told that the the students are responsible for maintaining floors, bathrooms, windows. Except for the high windows where a custodian is engaged to prevent the risk of students falling, everything is done by the young people. The students are connected with the school's social system very directly. No one throws paper on the floor because a classmate has to clean that floor and the student does not want anyone throwing paper on the floor when it is his or her turn to clean it. That sense of social connectiveness translates itself into the broader society. There are no graffiti on the buildings and no litter in the city streets. There is a sense of transmitted values that comes not through the curriculum but through the way the schools are organized that relates to the way society is organized. No one lectures the students on keeping the school clean. The organized group is the major influence.

The point about Japanese schooling is that the environment of the school directs the students toward a sense of social responsibility; the courses do not have to carry the entire burden. American education typically is not so organized. Except in the residential institutions, the curriculum, more specifically, each individual course must direct the students toward the polity. In the community colleges especially, student government is barely alive and student clubs attract few participants. The curriculum must carry the general education message.

Since the community college curriculum centers on the

liberal arts and occupational studies, general education must be diffused throughout those areas. The colleges have effectually reconceptualized the liberal arts in the direction of general education and many examples of integrative study of the humanities, sciences, and social sciences can be found. The colleges did this because of a commitment to general education and also because specialized study for those who would be liberal arts scholars or specialists was never part of their mission. They also have had some success in suffusing general education concepts into occupational studies, but here the record is not as good. General education may be found in the health fields where students are taught about the social responsibility of the health professions but many of the other occupations lag behind. Much must be done to connect occupational studies with the basic premise that all students need broader world views.

Liberal arts account for just over half of all enrollments in American community colleges. Most states set some general education requirements that must be fulfilled for graduation and the number of hours of English, history, and so on is often specified. Even where occupational certificates or degrees are the end point of the program, some general education aspects are often mandated. In many states the community colleges and the universities have a general education compact which suggests that a certain proportion of the students' general education will be fulfilled in the community colleges before they transfer to the university. Thus it is not difficult to trace the pattern of general education curricular studies across the nation.

However, constant attention must be paid to general

education because the courses keep slipping away from the concept. The liberal arts have been transformed but they must be continually re-considered lest they drift too far away from the academic disciplines from which they arose. Without the anchor of the disciplines, general education can too readily become "Home and Family Planning" or detached discussions of "Who are you?" and "Let's talk about how you feel." Many of the students were brought up at homes where the question, "Do you like it, honey?" was considered an intellectual exercise. The colleges must not perpetuate those banalities. Connecting with the polity makes a different set of demands. The question is not whether the student likes it; it is "What are you looking at? What is this thing? What is this idea?" To use another word, general education must center on critical thinking.

General education has suffered over the years because of a singular dilemma: The more specific the skill, the easier it is to teach it; the more general the application, the more difficult it is to teach it. It is impossible to resolve that dilemma. The colleges -- all schools -- tend to teach specific skills because they are easier, more obvious, more direct in their application. By teaching a student to perform a specific skill, the student can gain employment doing just that. (The fact that the skill will quickly become obsolete does not bother the community college leaders who say that the student can always come back and learn a new set of skills.) General education is difficult to teach because, by definition, it is broad and integrative. And the moment you try to make general education

specific, hence easy to teach, it is not general education any more. The supporters of general education must face that dilemma constantly.

A problem, not a dilemma, in providing general education relates to graduation requirements. Arguments have been raised about the importance of core curriculum, sets of courses which students must complete before they are awarded degrees. But nationwide, community colleges award degrees to eight percent of their students annually; 92 percent of the students attending the institution do not receive degrees. They do other things. They take classes for their own interest or they transfer without degrees. Making general education a core curriculum requirement for people before they can receive a degree is a wonderful idea, but it is irrelevant to most of the students.

If general education is to be required it should be required for everyone. But how, when most students can skirt degree requirements? Some institutions have mandated that anyone may matriculate but after any students have enrolled for as many as four classes, either during the same term or serially, they must be admitted to a program. That is, when the students attempt to sign up for a fifth class, the registration machinery flags the file and they are not allowed to take the class without having been admitted to a program leading to a degree or certificate. In those institutions the concept of the college as a passive university extension-type enterprise in which anyone may take any class at any time has been altered. The student must enter a program and in the program there are general education

requirements that must be filled. That is the most direct way of effecting a core curriculum.

Effecting General Education

Curriculum reformation demands leadership. Some successes have been achieved where a president or dean with an unwavering commitment to general education takes command. Elsewhere, faculty groups have driven curricular modification. The source of the leadership is not important except to note that it must be from within the institution. State-level mandates will not effect general education.

Some false problems afflict general education. One is the issue of what everyone should know. Various proponents put forth statements of concepts presumed evident in generally educated people. Faculty task forces and committees meet and labor for months to produce such lists. These goals may be derived from popular works purporting to center on cultural literacy. Sometimes the lists center on sets of books that students should read. But the unanswerable question of what everyone should know leads only to unending debate.

The colleges have been challenged to require ethnic studies for all their students as a way of ensuring a relative general education for them. And there are those who say we cannot develop a general education required for everyone because the students have varied backgrounds and goals. But saying that we can not have a general education suitable for everyone because of the many ethnic minority students is really raising a false issue. I have listened to many speakers recount demographic data

in great detail, staring at transparencies showing how many blacks live in the southeast, Hispanics in the southwest, and Asians in California. And just before my eyes glaze over, a bell goes off in my head. "So what?" I think. "What does this mean for the curriculum? Should we stop teaching sciences to black people? Should we not teach the humanities to the Asians? Which areas of the social sciences are most irrelevant for the Hispanics? What are you telling me? I know that the United States is comprised of an ever-growing number of various ethnic groups -- I can look around and see that. But what does this say to the college curriculum?" Hundreds of thousands of immigrants enter the United States each year. Nearly all of them are of Asian or Hispanic extraction. What should we do about that? Which aspect of general education should we modify?

Information about a special type of general education for ethnic minorities disturbs me. General education is for the purpose of bringing people together. It is not a special-purpose curriculum to be directed toward individual groups. I am also disturbed by the concept of the community college as a passive enterprise, the notion that since everyone in the community may not want the same curriculum, we should require nothing for any of them. This notion holds that if the community includes 200,000 individuals we should be prepared to offer 200,000 separate curriculums. That is ludicrous. If people want that much specialization, let them turn on their television with its myriad channels or read a specialized magazine or select their friends differentially. The community colleges are supposed to provide an integrative education for participation in the polity.

They should assist people to have shared understandings, to understand their neighbors' values. They are supposed to enhance their communities' social cohesion. The colleges should be centripetal forces in a society that is constantly beset by centrifugal tendencies. They must fight constantly against their own drift toward specialization. (4) Each course in a general education curriculum should be self contained because few students take courses in sequence. As example, the Maricopa Community College District in Phoenix, with 60,000 students spread across 7 campuses, reports that 47 percent of its students complete one course or less per term. They wander in and out taking a class when it fits their time of day or interests. It is difficult to sustain a sequenced pattern of courses with that type of movement in and out of the institution. And Maricopa is not unique or even unusual in that regard.

The self-contained general education course can be built in an interdisciplinary mode. Many of the community colleges in Florida have developed such interdisciplinary courses in the humanities. One has a faculty that works together to teach those courses. This group writes their own textbooks and develops their own student assessment plans. They are also prominent on the curriculum committee in their college to ensure that the integrated humanities course remains required for every student seeking a degree or certificate in that college. This phenomenon is not confined to Florida. Monroe Community College in New York has an interdisciplinary human ecology course. Los Medanos in California has a six-course core based on behavioral, social,

biological, and physical sciences, and language arts and humanistic studies.

Assessing Outcomes

One of the dilemmas in devising general education is that no list of competencies, no set of course goals is so water-tight that an individual instructor can not subvert it. That is, the catalog and the course outlines may list all sorts of goals and requirements and competencies but any instructor in any classroom can undercut them. The curriculum is ultimately in the hands of the instructor. Any collegewide general education effort must be reflected in something more than a list of courses or core curriculum goals. It must appear in a set of outcomes assessment procedures.

General education outcomes must be assessed globally. Cross-sectional samples of students can be drawn at random periodically and assessed for their general education knowledge. This mode of sampling reflects students course-taking behavior. It is not particularly useful to test only the students who have completed 60 or more units or who have filed graduation plans. A general education assessment plan should test a sample drawn from 100 percent of the student body, not from 8 percent.

This assessment can be much more than subject-matter centered, multiple-choice tests. It can take the form of individual interviews asking students what they know and how they know it. It can include asking the students what they have done over the past week, what books they have read, what letters they have written, what newspaper editorials have exercised them, what television shows have been prominent in their life. Sampling the

students is key.

Regardless of the form of assessment, it should in no way reflect on the work of any individual instructor or the outcome of any individual class. Nor should the assessment be created by any statewide committee or agency; the staff of the individual campus should be the largest unit building the assessment. Actually, it is only in the act of creating assessment procedures that the individual instructors and the faculty as a whole look at what they are really trying to teach. The catalog or the course outlines do not reflect the institution's true educational plan. That plan is carried through the types of student assessment that the institution furthers.

General education can not effected by a list of courses required statewide. Acceptable "transfer core" courses have been listed in state after state, usually after years of deliberation by intersegmental committees but this procedure only yields sets of distribution requirements. I have seen such lists with physical education included as an option under the humanities. When I asked how physical education got on a list of humanities distribution requirements the answer was "Where else would we put it?" Those lists of any two humanities courses from a given set, any two social science courses, any two science courses, and so on are politically inspired. They suggest a balance across curriculum areas but in fact they merely reflect the political skills held by advocates of one or another academic discipline. Furthermore, they are usually subverted by the community college staff members who change course titles and descriptions to make

certain areas of the curriculum fit the requirements and by university staff members who insist that transferring students have a variety of specialized classes before they are allowed to major in certain academic fields.

The students come to community colleges for many reasons. By their own report, one-third matriculate in order to gain credits toward the baccalaureate and another one-third in order to learn the skills they need to enter a job field. Fourteen percent seek upgrading in a job area in which they have already been employed and about that many again attend for their personal interest only. This latter group is comprised of those who already have degrees or who are not interested in the employment market; they are attending because they want to learn to use their personal computer or make furniture in their garage or use the ceramics kilns that the college makes available for its arts students. And there is a group of around 5 percent who are seeking basic skills. These are the students who have not completed high school when they were younger or the immigrants seeking English language training. Not incidentally, the proportion of students giving these reasons for attending has been quite stable over the past two decades.

These reasons -- transfer, employment entry, employment upgrade, personal interest, and basic skills -- sound quite dissimilar. In many ways they are, but general education as a curriculum organizer can link that which the college provides for all of them. Integrated general education courses can be required for everyone coming to the institution. Even the students seeking only a course or two for their own personal

interest can be directed to a general education-centered program after they have completed three or four courses of their choice. The college has an obligation to provide all of its students with just what they think they need but only up to a point. After that a college's place in the realm of American education demands that it direct its matriculants toward studies that will bring them to a greater understanding of the broader society and of their place within it.

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